What Constitutes *Good Writing*?

A Comparative Analysis of 20th and Early 21st Century Poetics

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Hva er *god skrivekunst?*

En komparativ analyse av poetikker fra det 20. og tidlige 21. århundre

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Trykket av Kristian Rein, Mandal

This would have never been were it not for my wonderful pack. Thank you.

Caffeine and sugar, here's to you.

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Introduction

The question most asked and answered by any avid reader must be "Is it any good?" You ask this of your friends, librarians, and newspaper critics upon considering your next literary adventure, and you might or might not take their view into consideration, depending on the reasoning underlying their verdict. There are a thousand aspects to every work of fiction, and we all have our individual preferences as to how these should come together in a good book. Some enjoy the strenuous endeavor of reading the entire *History of the Peloponnesian War* on their nights off, others consider Marcel Proust excellent company on the subway, whereas others yet prefer to read John Irving's latest or *Fifty Shades of Grey* on their free time – we consider it a matter of taste, and as we have all learned, there is no accounting for taste.

But does it necessarily follow that there is no accounting for good and bad writing? I think not, and neither can any writer who ever wrote a book on writing – if you prescribe dos and don'ts, you have an opinion on how it should be done and how it should not be done.

Such books on writing written by authors can be seen as *poetics*. Derived from the Greek *poeitikos* "pertaining to poetry," the *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines "poetics" as "the study of linguistic techniques in poetry or literature." The French literary theorist Gérard Genette further defines the word in stating that

> My program then was named "Theory of Literary Forms" – a title that I supposed to be less ambiguous for minds a little distant from this specialty, if it is one, than its (for me) synonym Poetics.
>
> (Genette, 2005: 14)

Poetics can, in keeping with these definitions, be seen as the theory of literary forms and literary discourse. The first example we have of a systematic, written poetics is Aristotle's. Here we will be considering a series of poetics that have been written by authors who may not have been as thorough and general in writing their poetics as Aristotle was. I have therefore chosen to refer to these as *personal poetics*.

My main selection of writers mainly wrote in the post-World War 2 era in America. I will also consider the poetics of Aristotle and Edgar Allan Poe for historical context, and include the view of other writers, critics and theoreticians where they seem appropriate.

My hypothesis is that there exist some basic ingredients necessary in the making of *good* fiction. I will go about proving this by comparing a selection of personal poetics written and expressed by accomplished 20th century writers, as found both in written pieces on the topic by themselves and as expressed by them to friends and interviewers. Naturally, this selection is not broad enough to set anything in stone, but I do believe a cross-section of this sort can speak volumes. If this selection of writers can agree on some crucial points considering *good* fiction, it would seem reasonable to assume, considering their differences, that they are not entirely alone in their perceptions.

The main personal poetics here to be considered and the years of their original publications are as follows:

Jack Kerouac

"Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1958)

"Belief and Technique for Modern Prose" (1959)

(In order to distinguish these two essays from each other, I will refer to their respective years of initial publication, 1958 and 1959, rather than the year of their joint publication, 2009)

David Foster Wallace

"E Unibus Pluram" (1993)

"Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988)

"The Nature of the Fun" (1998)

Stephen King

On Writing. A Memoir of the Craft. Revised ed. (2010)

Ayn Rand

The Romantic Manifesto. Expanded 2nd ed. (1975)

The Art of Fiction (2000)

A Brief History of Poetics

Aristotle: Our Cornerstone

In talking about the field of poetics, one cannot but start with Aristotle. Born in Greece in 384 BCE, he moved to Athens at seventeen in order to study at Plato's Academy. When Plato died twenty years later, Aristotle might have served as tutor to a young Alexander the Great at the Macedonian court, before heading back to Athens where he founded his own school, the Lyceum. Bearing in mind that he wrote his *Poetics* around 335 BCE, shortly before the great Egyptian city of Alexandria was even founded in 332 BCE, one can hardly deny that his views and consideration on the craft of fiction have truly stood the test of time.

In Ancient Greece, theatre played a huge role in daily life. As Eugene Garver explains in the introduction to *Poetics* (Aristotle, 2005: xv), plays were recited in front of as many as 30 000 people, or roughly half the population of Athens, in order to teach the people valuable lessons as well as to purge them of emotions that might have proved harmful if left untouched – this purgation was known as *catharsis*. The theatre was not reserved for the rich and famous: the state subsidized funds so that everyone could attend. In a way, attending the theatre was paid in the same way as attending juries and serving in the military, the last of which incidentally included obligatory participation in the chorus. In fact, the political, military, religious and aesthetic spheres were not separate from one another in Ancient Greece, and all went hand in hand, so the theatre was educational on several levels.

Naturally, Aristotle wrote his *Poetics* with drama in mind, indicating that by focusing on tragedies in particular, we can learn a lot about poetry in general. Garver suggests that such a focus might also lead the reader/viewer to find significance in "overall powers of empathy and sympathy that works of art can create in a viewer; Aristotle's word for such feelings is *philanthropia*, love of human beings" (Aristotle 2005: xxx). *Poetics*, then, is not a work on the art of written fiction as we know it today, but rather of tragedies. The novel of today – the longer narrative normally written in prose in a sequential form – was an art form still some 2 000 years in the future. So how does *Poetics* concern written literature today? In answering this, consider Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. By 'language embellished,' I mean language into which rhythm, 'harmony,' and song enter.
>
> (Aristotle 2005: 1449b25–30)

This is to say, Ancient Greek drama was the forerunner on which our modern understanding of fiction is based. For what is drama if not enacted fiction, or what Aristotle called *mimesis*? As Garver points out, "poetry" and related words did not only refer to the art form we call poems in Aristotle's time: the Greeks rather considered all human productions as poems, and their manufacturing as poetry (Aristotle 2005: xix). They did use the words in a narrower sense as well, referring to what we call by separate names: poems, drama, music and dance. Hence Aristotle's view that "the poet or 'maker' should be the maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions" (2005: 1451b27–9). This, then, suggests that fiction would be considered on the same basis as tragedies. On how to decide whether a piece of art is good or bad, Aristotle suggests that any piece of art should try to achieve the pleasure that is characteristic of its sort. Knowing the purpose of a piece of tragedy, then, will let you judge whether it is a good or bad one:

> Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy; for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents
>
> (2005: 1453b8–15)

This reasoning suggests that, as fiction today is not based of tragedy alone, but on drama or mimesis in general ("Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life" (2005: 1448a19–20)), it should be judged on the basis of whether it moves the reader through its imitation of emotions befitting its plot. For that is the pleasure of fiction, according to Aristotle: the pleasure in imitating and the pleasure of learning through recognizing imitations.

It is presumed that the surviving texts by Aristotle were meant for specific audiences, for example his students (Aristotle, 2005: xii). The *Poetics* is not, however,

a didactic work laying down truths or laws. It is rather a statement of Aristotle's thoughts on fiction's fundamental basics and problems as well as an attempt at formulating a standard form that all tragedies could adhere to. In order to voice these thoughts, Aristotle carefully reasoned over and formulated a series of terms and ideas. Take the idea that "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (2005: 1450b27–8). Readers of our time may wish to exchange the following definitions of such seemingly obvious terms for those of *mimesis, katharsis* and *hamartia*, but whereas the latter were known terms in Ancient Greece, where theatre after all played a major part in all people's daily lives, no one had, as far as we know, yet described and defined what confined a "whole" piece of fiction with regards to the aesthetic sphere only.

As food for thought, consider the possibility that Aristotle was indeed the first person ever to focus on the separate parts of a dramatic piece (such as beginning, middle and end) in detail. In that case, his contemporaries would have never encountered the terms as relating to fiction before. It follows that they would have to be carefully lain out, as opposed to the terms they knew from their everyday life with theatre. It just might be that our notion of fiction is so deeply rooted in his poetics, that his terms and definitions have become such an integral part of our world, that we fail to remember they were once formulated – that they were not always there. In this case, Garver's surprised reaction to how Aristotle focused on what we consider the basics is highly ironic.

Aristotle was the first person we know to have offered technical definitions of critical terms we still lean on in literary discourse today. He was the first philosopher to point out the superiority of plot over structure, and to lay down the general guidelines of how such a structure should, as it were, be structured: "Beauty depends on magnitude and order," he wrote (2005: 1450b37), "so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by memory" (2005: 1451a5–6). Furthermore,

> the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed
>
> (2005: 1451a32–4)

Keeping this in mind, it is easy to understand how the *Poetics* has survived the millennia.

Baltimore, 2 181 Years Later…

In his "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), Edgar Allan Poe wondered why there had been so little writing on how a piece fiction can attain its "ultimate point of completion" (2003: 431). Perhaps, he asked, it was due to an authorial vanity – perhaps most writers preferred their readers to believe that their work was the result of inspired frenzies, of an "ecstatic intuition" (2003: 431). In Poe's day and age, referred to as the Romantic era in literature, it was common to believe that art was gifted by the muses and that it bore a divine inhumanity, that it was merely to be transcribed by the humble artist who would himself be incapable of composing such perfection.

Considering this Romantic view, it seems fair to attribute the lack of personal poetics from the Romantic era to authorial omission, either in the way of sparing the reader the gory details of creation or in the way of conserving the idea of divine inspiration. Especially in the last case, allowing readers a sneak peak behind the scenes could prove disastrous. Who would like to exchange the beautiful idea of muses for the grotesque picture of the solitary, tormented writer struggling to grab hold of fluttering ideas, ever rewriting, erasing, and discarding his hard work?

Personal poetics can be seen as a form of what Gérard Genette calls autocommentary, a form of "autonomous epitexts" (1997: 369) where authors comment on their work, dissociated from any other independent text. Seeing as the epitext is a paratextual element free to circulate in its own right, comments of this sort are tied closer to the writer's view on text and writing in general than to his view of any one work in particular. This is because the epitext, as opposed to the peritext, is not primarily paratextual in purpose. Rather, it might offer paratextual elements as an *effect.* These elements may come in the form of relevant biographical, socioeconomic and political facts, or they may be pieces of information about the writer's routines, influences, and philosophy.

The practice of writing about writing is, as we have now seen, a relatively modern one, seeing as critical commentary in general and authors' commentaries in particular were for a long time considered immodest or improper. Poe was way ahead of his time in demystifying the act of writing fiction. In fact it seems only appropriate to say that he initiated a tradition in modern times that had seemingly lain dormant in the West for some two thousand years. We can only join Genette in wondering why it took the better part of a century for more writers to follow his example.

It Took Another Century to Really Get Going

Although the modern period has undoubtedly proved more open to writers' commentaries, we are still in the process of accepting the *auto*commentary. Old hang-ups – such as the Romantic authorial vanity Poe objected to – have now been replaced by a new one: the presumption of authorial noncompetence. Can we trust what an author says about his own work? Do we even want to? Many find this sort of commentary to be absolutely superfluous or unnecessary in any reading experience. Genette, however, holds the view that an author's purpose *should* be taken into account, and writes

> The relevance I accord to the author's purpose, and therefore to his "point of view," may seem excessive and methodologically very naive. That relevance is, strictly speaking, imposed by my subject, whose entire functioning is based – even if this is sometimes denied – on the simple postulate that the author "knows best" what we should think about his work. (…) This view, held almost unconditionally for centuries, is today, as we know, assailed for fairly diverse reasons, wherein a certain formalist approach ("There is no true meaning to a text") and a certain psychoanalytical approach ("There is a true meaning, but the author cannot know it") paradoxically hit it off well. (…) valid or not, the author's viewpoint is part of the paratextual performance, sustains it, anchors it.
>
> (2007: 408)

The budding acceptance of autocommentary mixed with the presumption of authorial noncompetence may have paved the path for personal poetics. The writer might not be considered as qualified to interpret his own work, but he sure is the most qualified person to comment on *how* he wrote it (and thus, we may assume, to a certain extent, how he thinks one *should* write).

The most obvious advantage we can gain from reading autocommentaries in the form of personal poetics is their position of autonomy. These are monologues where the author gets to tell his readers about his process of creation – either in general or as pertaining to form, style, theme or any other number of aspects. In addition, its positioning *outside* his fictitious works leaves him in a position where he is free to deliver a commentary dissociated from particular works. He may talk in more general terms, without having to impose his commentary on the reading of one of his novels.

Selected Poetics of the 20th and Early 21st Centuries

Seeing how Aristotle's *Poetics* have influenced our literary reality in such a high degree for 2 350 years, it is interesting to consider what we can gain from reading its contemporary equivalents.

Jack Kerouac, Stephen King, David Foster Wallace and Ayn Rand are four writers with little in common. Whereas the Canadian Kerouac belonged to the Beat-generation of the 1950s, his contemporary, the Russian-American Ayn Rand, saw herself as a bridge between the Romantic era and posterity. Stephen King is on his part a sci-fi writer highly acclimatized to the American consumer-society, whereas his fellow-American David Foster Wallace is widely acclaimed as one of the most influential writers of the 1990s, with his hysterical realism and postmodernist works. These four writers came from very different backgrounds, all belonged to different literary movements, and can be said to have written for different audiences. What they do have in common is that they all wrote about writing – they all expressed a form of poetics at some point in their careers.

As opposed to Aristotle's trains of thought and practical problem solving, we will see that most of the modern poetics here to be considered tend to hold a manifesto-cum-memoir form – they serve as public statements of literary aims and philosophies. Taken how immensely the writers differ from one another, imagine the value of knowing what crucial standards for good writing they agreed on, in spite of their discrepancies. If accomplished and appraised 20th century writers with seemingly very little in common have agreed on what you should most definitely do and not do in order to write well, should you not consider their points in practice? They have, after all, survived this long for a reason: we still read them.

Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac (1922–1969) holds a special place in many readers' hearts with his jazzy accounts of America, seen from the road. Growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts, a decaying mill town with a strong Canadian culture, French-Canadian Kerouac did not speak English before he was six. Both a good student and a football star, he later got a scholarship to Columbia, but after breaking a leg and feeling that schoolwork

stole all the time he preferred to spend on his "adventurous education," he dropped out of the university and devoted himself to his own studies.

There was a war brewing, but as he would soon discover, Kerouac was not at all fit to join the army with its strict discipline and conformist undertone. He wrote in 1968 that "I did mind the idea that I should be disciplined to death" (2001: 153) and "I feel I have to defend a certain portion of Athenian ethos, as might we say, (…) I just cant take that business of telling me how to be day in and day out" (2001: 162). After arguing his way out of naval service by telling the doctor he "was a man of letters [and] independent thought" (2001: 162), however, he decided to join the Merchant Marine, entering in 1942. "I wanted to stay out for awhile and study America," (2001: 109) he later wrote. On board, he would be made fun of because he spent every possible moment reading and writing, an endeavor that resulted in his first novel, *The Sea Is My Brother* (1942). He was not pleased with his work, which he described as "a crock as literature but as handprinting beautiful" (2001: 148), and it would not be published in his lifetime.

Returning from the North Atlantic, he soon met Columbia freshman Allen Ginsberg, Harvard-educated junkie William S. Burroughs, hustler-raconteur Herbert Huncke, and, some time later, the Denver car-thief and ladies' man Neal Cassady, who would become Kerouac's literary muse and main source of inspiration. The group of friends would stay out all night, writing visionary poetry and manuscripts, trying to make sense of a world that madly geared up for more war, while strung out on experimental drugs. Still completely self-assured in his vocation as a writer, he kept at it and published his first novel, *The Town and the City*, eight years later. Still, it was not before the publication of his most famous novel, *On the Road* in 1957, that he really made it into America's literary scene. He got to publish 13 more novels before his death in 1969, several of which are still widely read today, and five more manuscripts have been published posthumously, four of which after the year 2000.

"Only a genius could reinvent the English sentence, make it long, looped, grammatically suspicious, and become a revered master of the writer's art" reads the beginning of Regina Weinreich's foreword to Jack Kerouac's two essays on the writing of prose fiction (2009). In an interview with *Escapade Magazine* in 1959, Kerouac said that he "got sick and tired of the conventional English sentence, so ironbound in its rules," (2009) a view reflected in the commandments of "Belief and Technique for Modern Prose" (1959): "Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical

inhibition," "Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind," "Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better;" "You're a genius all the time."

It is interesting to observe that Kerouac's poetics – boiled down in "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1958) and "Belief and Technique for Modern Prose" (1959) – are reminiscent of the Romantic notion of wild, ecstatic fits of inspiration despised by the likes of Poe. Kerouac, however, never disguised the fact that he did the dirty work, too. The two opposite ideas of creation – let us call them feeling and mechanics – are united in his tip "Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for your own joy" (1959). Kerouac might not have been a spokesperson for careful revision, as opposed to for example King, but he did put down an awful lot of work before he sat down by his typewriter to bring it all together in his high-speed, jazzy novels. This thorough groundwork would be put down in his notebooks, for which he was known and would bring on all of his far and wide travels across the American continent, searching for experience, knowledge and inspiring characters.

Neither did he ever deny the autobiographical aspect that is highly evident in a vast majority of his writing. He clearly based most of his popular fiction on what had really happened, sharing every interesting detail in keeping with his philosophy of spontaneity and full disclosure. In his case, it was the publishing business that felt the need to hold back on this point – his most successful novel, *On the Road,* for example, was first published in a fictionalized and revised version in 1957, and did not appear in its original form (here with the real names of Kerouac's acquaintances and its real format, unedited except for in strictly necessary cases) before it was released as *On the Road: The Original Scroll* 50 years later, in 2007. Furthermore, all the novels that were published during his lifetime were romans á clef, and his editors wanted new keys for every novel so as to hide their highly autobiographical nature.

When it came to the point from which to start writing, Kerouac was of a mind that differed from those of the other authors, as he felt that a writer should

> begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion
>
> (1958)

Ayn Rand

Growing up in Russia, Ayn Rand (1905–1982) went from a very comfortable childhood in the bourgeois society to a quite hard youth under the Bolsheviks. Politically interested from a young age, Rand would use her own experience of the drastic political and social changes in Russia in much of her fiction, as we will come back to later. She moved to America in her early twenties, where she married and settled down. She changed her name, gained an American citizenship, and, ever writing in English, have since been considered as an American writer.

Rand is the only of the writers here considered who herself described her poetics as a "manifesto." She opens her *Romantic Manifesto*, first collected and published in one volume in 1969, and based on the same 1958 lecture series as *The Art of Fiction* from 2000, with defining the word as "a public declaration of intentions, opinions, objectives or motives" and goes on to advise "those who feel that art is outside the province of reason" to "leave this book alone: it is not for them" (1975: v). Already in the course of reading the first few pages, any reader would be very clear on her two most basic notions: that aesthetics should be based on rationality, and that art – in the very least writing – should strive to reach the ideals formulated in Romanticism, which she dubs the "greatest achievement in art history" (1975: viii):

> In regard to Romanticism, I have often thought that I am a bridge from the unidentified past to the future (…) —between the esthetic achievements of the nineteenth century and the minds that choose to discover them
>
> (1975: vi–viii)

To Rand, art was "a concretization of metaphysics," a psycho-epistemological process best illustrated in literature through characterization. She was particularly fond on what she called "*normative* abstractions," that is, definitions of moral principles concerning "what man *ought to be*" (1975: 8–9). For art was, in her mind, the indispensable medium for conveying moral ideals. Consider Howard Roark, the individualist architect protagonist of *The Fountainhead* (1943) who chose to struggle rather than compromise his personal and artistic integrity, and Hank Rearden and Francisco d'Anconia in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Seeing as Rand was convinced that art should be focused on the metaphysical rather than the ethical, this conveying of moral ideals should only be a consequence of, as opposed to the reason for, writing, in her

opinion. The morally ideal characters should, however, deserve to be *valued* as an end in themselves in fiction. This view of Rand's directly corresponds to Aristotle's view on the qualities necessary in the characters of tragedies:

> an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these – thought and character – are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends
>
> (Aristotle 2005: 1449b38–1450a3)

In keeping with this focus on the concretization of metaphysics, Rand was of the opinion that literature's – and especially the novel's – most important aesthetic principle was formulated by Aristotle: "It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen" (2005: 1451a36–8), which means that fiction – as opposed to history – has the power to represent things as they *might* and *ought* to be, not only as they are. "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history:" as Aristotle concludes, "for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (2005: 1451b4–8). Rand continued to echo Aristotle as she listed the novel's four main attributes, namely theme, plot, characterization and style (mirroring four out of his six: thought, plot, character and diction, whereas abandoning spectacle and song), and goes on to explain how to view these in order to stick to the main principle:

According to Rand, the theme, or the novel's *meaning*, can be philosophical in nature, or it can be a narrow generalization. The main thing to remember is that any novel with "no discernible theme (…) is a bad novel; its flaw is lack of integration," for the theme defines the novel's purpose, and "form follows purpose" (1975:72). Thus, the plot – the most central structural aspect in Rand's writing – emerges from the theme. Also here, Rand took a note from Aristotle, who said that "most important of all is the structure of the incidents" (2005: 1450a15), continuing "The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy" (2005: 1450a28–9). Furthermore, the theme and plot – or plot-theme, as Rand coined the symbiosis – has to be dramatized through the characters. It has to come through in action, just as life comes through in action. Fiction, after all, is *mimesis*.

The main objective with regards to characterization, Rand found, is to portray abstractions of perfect human beings that can be perceived as concrete by the reader.

The way to do this is to portray morally superior essential human traits through action: one action is "worth a thousand adjectives" (1975: 79). Furthermore, characters must be consistent. Any and every inconsistency in their nature has to be intentional on the author's part, or the work's literary value will suffer.

Concluding on the integration of these three points, Rand stated that

> a good novel is an indivisible sum: every one scene, sequence and passage of a good novel has to involve, contribute to and advance all three of its major attributes: theme, plot, characterization
>
> (1975: 85)

Style, for its part, is no literary end in itself, according to Rand. It serves only as the mode in which a novel's meaning is conveyed, but it might still be the most psychologically telling aspect of a novel. It has two main elements: choice of content (aspects added to a passage in terms of descriptions, dialogue, narrative) and choice of words (which words are included and which are omitted).

Rand was very clear on the fact that it was the portrayal of an ideal man that spurred her writing. This, as we have seen, she considered an end in itself. In reading, however, she admitted coming to fiction as a child would, namely for the stories. In testing both her own and other authors' stories, she would consider whether she would want to meet the characters and experience the events in real life. Were the characters and events ends in themselves? If the answer were yes, she would know she had hit upon something good.

Stephen King

Stephen King is one of our times' best-known horror and fantasy-writers. Born in 1947, he grew up with his older brother and mother after his father left the family early in his life. The family moved around during King's childhood, and lived in relative poverty. King would publish his first story, "I Was a Teenage Grave Robber," in a fan magazine in 1965. After a rocky period where he struggled to support his own young family, resorting to teaching high-school English at the cost of his own writing-time, his career did not kick off before the 1973 publication of his novel *Carrie*. His debut soon became a best-seller, as would most of his later novels. Since its publication, King has sold more than three hundred million books worldwide, according to *The Paris Review*.

King's *On Writing* constantly hovers on the crossing between style-manual, memoir and autobiography. This allows King to jump back and forth between describing how he likes to work and where he finds inspiration, and prescribing advice and instructions. It seems clear from the very start that King will not be held responsible for what may come of his advice, seeing as he does not "believe writers *can* be made, either by circumstances of by self-will (although [he] did believe those things once). The equipment comes with the original package" (2010: 18). He does, however, believe that many hold some talent as storytellers, and that this talent can be sharpened. At any rate, he chooses to open with a warning:

> This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with bullshit. Fiction writers, present company included, don't understand very much about what they do— not why it works when it's good, not why it doesn't when it's bad. I figured the shorter the book, the less the bullshit.
>
> (2010: ix)

As most readers are well aware, Stephen King is a sci-fi/fantasy writer. He attributes the start of his writing career to the general lack of electronic entertainment in his childhood and half-jokes that he is one of the last American novelists who could not rely on video to entertain him, suggesting that any aspiring writer could do worse than to blow up their television set. As a bored kid, he would copy comic strips, adding his own descriptions "where they seemed appropriate" before moving on to printing his own versions of famous horror stories in the family's basement and selling them at school – "imitation preceded creation," as he writes (2010: 27). His mind focused on how to make money off of his small business, he soon figured out what made some of his stories a hit amongst his peers.

At this age, King started submitting his stories to men's magazines, where you could get a few dollars for an accepted story. He kept getting rejected, bud savored every response that bore advice from the editor in question: "When you're still too young to shave, optimism is a perfectly legitimate response to failure" (2010: 40).

This said, we could deduct that King was soon to consider the financial upside to writing stories aimed at the cravings of his readers. His sort of authorship cannot be said to have upheld the most glorious of reputations in our times, and the reasons may be many. Often critics' suspicions about popular success are justified, but as King writes, there are also cases where these suspicions are simple thoughtlessness: "No

one can be as intellectually slothful as a really smart person; give smart people half a chance and they will ship their oars and drift … dozing to Byzantium, you might say" (2010: 143). King admits to having spent many years feeling ashamed about the fiction he writes, and says he had entered his forties before he realized that every fiction writer will be criticized for wasting their talent at some point or another, regardless of what they write. No matter what views you might hold, King's realization carries a valuable notion: Your choice of genre need not be reflected in your writing style. Horror stories may be skillfully or even beautifully written – take Poe as the prime example, the father of all Western horror and detective stories – just as much as a modern classic may be wanting in terms of style. As Jean-Paul Sartre said, subjects suggest the style, but they do not order it (2003: 16). As we will see, David Foster Wallace was of a similar mind. Not a fan of the most entertainment-oriented literature, Wallace still found that even what he deemed "trash writing" could be craftfully written and engaging in its narrative construction.

David Foster Wallace

David Foster Wallace (1962–2008) has by many been known as the most gifted and original American novelist of his generation. In keeping with the notion of the writer as a dark-spirited artist with a troubled soul and a fast but short life, he gained literary acclaim in his twenties and landed himself in the hospital due to depression and drug abuse before he hit thirty. At this point in life, he was already burnt out – one thing that seems clear, both about Wallace the man and Wallace the writer, is that he was *intense.* Some hold his most famous novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996), as the seminal novel of the 90s, and many more hold that he paved the way for his contemporaries in a higher degree than any other 90s writer.

In *Five Dials*' 2008 special celebrating the life and work of Wallace, in which tributes given at the Skirball Center at New York University are printed, his friend and colleague Zadie Smith made it clear what made him so special, both as a man and as a writer. She starts off by stating that his talent was "so obviously great it confused people" and that his complexity was a gift in a culture that "depletes you daily of your capacity for imagination, for language, for autonomous thought." This, she continues, he brought with him in his writing, letting his "labyrinthine sentences [break] the rhythm that excludes thinking" (2008: 14). Weighed down by his genius and depression, Smith describes how Wallace wrote as if his talent for the written word

was a responsibility. He seems to have found his talent more troublesome than Smith lets on, a fact we will come back to later.

In 1993, Larry McCaffery conducted an interview with Wallace where they touched upon the fact that he considered the writing of his other best-known novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), "recreational." Was Wallace still of the same mind in writing fiction, McCaffrey wonders. Wallace replies that while it is "not play anymore in the sense of laughs and yucks and nonstop thrills," he has found a discipline where he tries to "play without getting overcome by insecurity or vanity or ego" (Burn 2012: 50).

Wallace went on to state that he had "gotten convinced that there's something kind of timelessly vital and sacred about good writing." This thing has less to do with talent – even golden talent – which he likens to having a pen that works as opposed to one that does not, but everything to do with the consciousness that lies behind the text, the "art's heart's purpose." The purpose has to do with love, and with being able to love without needing to be loved in return. "It seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do," he said,

> from Carver to Chekov to Flannery O'Connor, or like the Tolstoy of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" or the Pynchon of *Gravity's Rainbow* – is *give* the reader something. The reader walks away from real art heavier than she came to it. Fuller. All the attention and engagement and work you need to get from the reader can't be for your benefit; it's got to be for hers
>
> (Burn 2012: 50)

As Wallace writes about his later stages of authorship, when he regained the feeling of having fun that he lost to a self-conscious sort of vanity along the way,

> Fiction becomes a weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself or present yourself in a way you figure you will be maximally likeable
>
> (2012: 198–9)

He called the process of reaching this point confusing, scary and hard, but promised it would turn out to be the best fun.

Comparison of the Selected Poetics Pt. I

Feeling versus Mechanics

Stephen King remembers how, in his days at the University of Maine around 1969, there was

> a view among the student writers I knew at that time that good writing came spontaneously, in an uprush of feeling that had to be caught at once (…) Would-be poets were living in a dewy Tolkien-tinged world, catching poems out of the ether. It was pretty much unanimous: serious art came from … *out there!* Writers were blessed stenographers taking divine diction.
>
> (2010: 63)

In King's world, spontaneity had taken a hold on some of the liberal arts students, who favored feeling over mechanics. It is quite interesting to see how the Romantic notion of divine diction through powerless human mediums had yet again bloomed within the literary consciousness. Yet, it could seem like the popular form of the paradigm lacked the mechanical aspect that was all-important to all the authors we deal with here. As King puts it in articulating his belief that you can be intoxicated *and* idea-driven at the same time: "If stone-sober people can fuck like they're out of their minds—can actually be out of their minds while caught in that throe—why shouldn't writers be able to go bonkers and still stay sane?" It is quite ironic that he writes, a hundred pages later, "my basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow (and to transcribe them, of course)" (King 2010: 163) – a view on writing that thoroughly corresponds to the Romantic, spontaneity-driven writing style he had just criticized.

Neither does it seem like he has a problem with spontaneity when it comes down to it: he writes that the three main parts of a novel is narration, description and dialogue, but that he distrusts plots – "the good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice" – "first, because our *lives* are largely plotless (…) and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible (King 2010: 163–4). It is here worth noting King's and Rand's conflicting views on plot. The first does not trust it and does not even believe they need to be part of a novel, whereas the latter believed – as did Aristotle – there can be no good novel without a good plot.

King's paradoxical view is summed up when he writes "we are talking about tools and carpentry, about words and style… but as we move along, you'd do well to remember that we are also talking about magic" (2010: 137).

Where Rand was concerned, she hardly let her feelings dictate her writing, rather trusting her sober reason, and constantly securing and structurally supporting the ever-important plot-theme core of her fiction. Her firm belief in reason was the very opposite of "bonkers."

Kerouac resided on both sides of the spectrum, doing tons of research before releasing it all furious writing sessions spurred by stimulating substances. Seven years on the road, for instance, were channeled into the three weeks it took him to type out *On the Road*. Whereas King wants to go bonkers and still stay sane, Kerouac went for a different approach to the same thought – he stayed relatively "sane" in the mechanical preparation, and went bonkers in typing out the final product.

Form and Language

When it comes to form and language, Kerouac was convinced that something you feel will find its own form in writing. Sartre was of the same opinion: "We are within language as within our body. We *feel* it spontaneously" (2003: 12). Kerouac was convinced that one should not struggle to write poetical fiction, but rather convey what really exists, removing all literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibitions and "swim in language sea" without ever feeling shame in your own experience, knowledge and language (1959). A large part of his 1959 essay deals with the notion of working outwards from what you see with your inner eye, sketching memories, landscapes and situations, never stopping to think of words but grabbing the first that come to mind, "Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better." Aristotle also talked favorably of such sketching: "As for the story, whether the poet takes it ready made or constructs it for himself, he should first sketch its general outline, and then fill in the episodes and amplify in detail" (2005: 1454a7–1455b2). This tip seems to mirror what Kerouac did on the road for all those years, keeping his notebooks, outlining his travels in them.

Kerouac's view that it was all *there*, in your mind, ready for the taking, opposes those of King and Rand, whose fiction was and is laboriously schemed and planned out to the least detail. At the same time, correlations can be found even where they disagree. Consider King's view that vocabulary is a writer's most important tool,

and that the first rule in using it is "*use the first word that comes to mind, if it is appropriate and colorful*" (2010: 118). One should never, however, look for longer or better words to replace the ones that first spring to mind on account of feeling ashamed. Hemingway used a smaller and simpler vocabulary than many others, and his fiction is hardly wanting in sense of words.

On the topic of reading, Kerouac and King agree heartily, as one is often reminded in *On Writing* and in the entirety of Kerouac's oeuvre. Rand also agrees, writing that "In order to form your own literary taste and put it under your conscious control" you should always "account for what you do or do not like in your reading" (Rand 2000: 8). Because through reading, you unconsciously absorb words and grammatical logic. King points out that not everyone absorbs grammar through spoken and written language, and figures that must be why Strunk and White did not bother with the basics in their style bible *The Elements of Style*. At any rate, bad grammar fosters bad sentences, which would put any writer at a loss. Disregarding the rules of language does not, however, automatically make you a bad writer. King agrees with Strunk in that "the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric," but that "Unless he is certain of doing well, [the writer] will probably do best to follow the rules" (Strunk 2012: 6).

Wallace was one of these "best writers," bending the rules of grammar and syntax where he saw fit. He would, however, teach his students to heed the rules, telling them "don't give your talent the finger" (Max 2012: 187). A self-declared "grammar-nazi" (Max 2012: 102) and "hard-core syntax wienie (Max 2012: 25), Wallace treasured the logical system of language that he had grown to love in his childhood home where his mother, an English teacher, had imposed on her family a love for words, word play, puns, and correct grammar. His creative writing classes would always start with a grammar section, penalizing his students for grammar and spelling mistakes, ensuring that they took good care of their language.

Rand was also a lover of words, regarding language as a tool of honor that should always be used precisely. In this regard, she was very critical of Thomas Wolfe's and James Joyce's use of language. Kerouac, for his part, considered these writers as two of his main sources for stylistic influence. Rand further believed that your language had to be automatic before you could write, so that you "are not conscious of groping for words or forming them into a sentence" (Rand 2000: 1–2) and that all writers rely on their subconscious, but that they need to learn how.

The Element of Style

Kerouac attributed his spontaneous style to his muse Neal Cassady, whose "first-person, fast, mad, confessional, completely serious, all detailed" letters (Berrigan: 1968) inspired a change in his style that would stick with him throughout his authorship. Cassady had started off writing in the same manner as Kerouac, constantly revising and tweaking his sentences only to discover that they lost the one thing he tried to covey, namely *feeling*. One letter in particular has gone down in cult history as a breaking point in both their authorships: the *Joan Anderson Letter* (1950). Practically a short novella, this letter is thought to be the first example where the Beat aspects of confession and spontaneity truly merged into the style Cassady and Kerouac would become famous for. Kerouac, in answer to the letter, wrote

> I thought it ranked among the best things ever written in America (…) You gather all the best styles … of Joyce, Celine, Dosty & Proust … and utilize them in the muscular rush of your own narrative & exitement … It is the exact stuff upon which American Lit is still to be founded.
>
> (1996: 242)

Cassady and Kerouac, with or without the company of their close friends, would spend whole nights and days talking – more often than not on stimulating drugs – purging their souls and minds to each other, sharing ideas. During these sessions they further developed their generation's and their group's lingo, agreeing that this speedy, confessional and literally ecstatic way of talking was the only way they could express the fast and tense feeling of age they were living in.

Wallace's talent with style can be reflected in what Jonathan Franzen said of him: "nowhere was Dave more totally and gorgeously able to maintain control than in his written language. He had the most commanding and exciting and inventive rhetorical virtuosity of any writer alive" (*Five Dials* 2008: 16). Control is a key word, considering his love for mixing "high" and "low" cultures in language so that abstruse, long words peppered informal diction in a very characteristic manner. Wallace corresponds well to what Aristotle had to say on the "perfection of style," which he defined as being clear without being low or commonplace. The clearest style is that which uses only current or proper words" (2005: 1458a17–19). This could, however, turn out to sound exactly commonplace, so Aristotle continued to say that lofty diction raised above the commonplace, complete with unusual (strange, rare, lengthened or metaphorical) words is to prefer, but a style "wholly composed of

such words is either a riddle or a jargon," and should be avoided (2005: 1458a25–6). Furthermore, Aristotle felt that the deviation in exceptional cases from the normal idiom would gain an author's language distinction. The greatest thing, he pointed out, is for a writer to have a mind for good metaphors, as these imply an eye for resemblances. Aristotle saw this talent as "the mark of genius" (2005: 1458b7).

Rand's saw style was as a psychologically telling aspect of the novel, but thought it should never be considered an end in itself. She saw it as the manner in which a writer expresses his feelings, and as such found it dependent on the writer's ability to feel and his possession of a vocabulary that was adequate to express what he felt, as acquired through reading and conversations.

Whereas she saw theme, plot and characterization as the "what" of a novel, Rand saw style as the "how." Style could be divided into two categories, namely the choice of content and the selection of words to transmit the content. Ecchoing Strunk & White's "omit needless words" (2012: 24) – a rule King highly favors – she focused on the importance of being conscious of the words you include and omit, as well as how you use your chosen words to construct sentences. On this topic, she made herself very clear: "a good style is one that conveys the most with the greatest economy of words" and "A great literary style is one that combines five or more different meanings in one clear sentence (I do not mean ambiguity but the communication of different issues)" (2000: 143).

Do not worry that your style will be unoriginal, however, for "in the selection and order of words, so many possibilities exist that you never have to worry about whether you will achieve an individual style. You will achieve it; but only if you do not *aim* at it consciously" (2000: 91). She warned against imitating other writing styles ("Nothing could be deadlier: this is a sure way never to acquire a style of your own") and argued that this "most complex [element] of writing" was best left to instinct and the subconscious (2000: 91–2).

"In style," Rand wrote, "form follows function" (2000: 91–2) – what you mean to write dictates the style in which you do it. You simply need to let it happen, never forcing your style, and go back to your mental list of what you like and do not like in literature if you feel like it does not come out right. In other words, use your *reasoning*. She did, however, point out that "one of the beauties of a good literary style" – and make no mistake, no good style sounds like a synopsis of events – "is that it combines clear denotation with the skillful use of connotation" (2000: 108),

and offers a few concrete tips: do not "ride" words, never destroy the dignity of a thought by overwriting it, and know when to stop.

Revision and Editing

King is keen to imprint on his readers that it is important to write first with your door closed, then with your door open. In fact, he goes on to include a whole rule in favor of editors in the "Third Foreword:" "The editor is always right." Or, to put it in other words, "to write is human, to edit is divine" (2010: x). Finally, he notes, "that DELETE key is on your machine for a good reason" (2010: 196).

Kerouac would certainly care to disagree, as would Wallace. In an interview with Ted Berrigan in *The Paris Review* (1968), Kerouac recounted how he, in his youth, would write slow and deliberately, constantly revising, deleting and rewriting his sentences until they lost their *feeling.* Seeing as he held feeling higher than craft in art, he stopped revising in order to "simply give the reader the actual workings of [his] mind during the writing itself: you confess your thoughts about events in your own unchangeable way…" (Berrigan, 1968); "Do not afterthink except for poetic or P.S. reasons. Never afterthink to "improve" or defray impressions" (1958). The reluctance to revise was further spurred when he had to work with Malcolm Cowley in the pre-publication editing of *On the Road* (1957) and *The Dharma Bums* (1958). Kerouac recounted feeling powerless in protecting his style while the editor "made endless revisions and inserted thousands of needless commas," (Berrigan 1968) practically rewriting Kerouac's prose to fit a more conventional form and thus loosing the social comments conveyed by the particular style it was originally written in. Kerouac felt that "the only thing I've got to offer [is] the true story of what I saw and how I saw it" (1968), and considering the central role his style played in the portrayal of his experience of America, the episodes with Cowley led him to decide that all his future novels would have to be published as they were written, sometimes excepting proofreading and correction of logical errors.

Wallace's deep understanding for language's underlying logic would be apparent also in the editing of his novels, where he at one point assured his editor that he would be "neurotic and obsessive," but "not too intransigent or offensive of [his] stuff" – a promise he would apparently stick to most of the time (Max 2012: 68). He would, however, have to "copy-edit the copy-editor," (Max 2012: 77) seeing as his knowledge of grammar, syntax, and the English language in general far outdid most

of his copy-editors', an exhausting process considering his departures from their conventional use and the copy-editors' attempts to standardize his prose.

Rand's view on the topic lies somewhere in between. "To master the art of writing," she wrote,

> you have to be conscious of why you are doing things—but do not edit yourself while writing. Just as you cannot change horses in the middle of a stream, so you cannot change premises in the middle of writing.
>
> (2000: 4)

Thus, you should "Write as it comes to you—then (next morning, preferably) turn editor and read over what you have written" (2000: 4).

Show, Don't Tell

The notion of showing versus telling is an old one. We can trace it back to Plato, who described two modes of narrative in book III of his *The Republic* (ca 380 BCE): in the first, the poet himself is speaking ("pure narrative"), whereas in the other the poet speaks as though he was someone else ("mimesis"). Plato's take on narrative was more or less lost on the Ancient Greek tradition, where narrative discourse was not a hot topic. Aristotle, a student of Plato's, faded the contrast between the modes of narrative Plato had lain out, making them two sides of the same story: what *he* chose to call mimesis.

Plato's distinction did, however, resurface in the United States and England in the 20th century, especially with the coming of Henry James and the Jamesians in the form of showing versus telling. This "new" standard was quick to take hold on the literary consciousness, and became a big deal in principles of novelistic aesthetics. Since, it has become the norm rather than the exception (Genette 1983: 162–4).

King and Rand's poetics are especially clear on the fact that in order to really share your fiction with a reader, you need to *show*, not tell. King prescribes an ascetic relationship to details and one of his "cardinal rules of good fiction[:] never tell us a thing that you can show us, instead" (2010: 180), whereas Rand insists that writers need to let characters' nature shine through in their actions. Characteristics ascribed to a fictional person will not stick if the reader is merely told that they reside within him. The character always has to act in accordance with his nature, and his nature must come to show in his actions – moral excellence was after all what she herself strived to convey through her fiction.

Whereas Wallace seems to have agreed with this basic notion of storytelling, he also found the practice annoying when it was not conducted in a seamless manner. Drawing attention to the fact that you are now *showing* through action what you want to tell your reader and letting your reader consciously note this fact is not, Wallace wrote, the way to do it. He pointed out this irksome tendency as a downside of writing programs, where making a point of following the prescribed rules and not allowing for rule bending – in his opinion – could result in literary snafus such as this. Basically telling a reader that you are now showing him what you are telling him is not an elegant way to go about narrative, and defies its own purpose.

The Autobiographical Aspect

Another recurrent theme is that of autobiographical writing. The scope of autobiographical writing is wider than one could expect, considering how well most people know themselves and the lines between their own lives and that of the fictional characters they create. In John Clellon Holmes' – a friend and fellow Beatnik of Kerouac's – words,

> The interaction between the imagination and reality is the source of all literature (…) probably not for the realists or the naturalists, whom nobody really reads anymore, in which the personality of the author, the consciousness of the author, the point of view of the author never get into the books. Jack didn't believe that creative writing could be done objectively. And I agree with him absolutely.
>
> (Lerner & McAdams 1986: 19:40–20:09)

So, whereas Kerouac readily admitted that most of his fiction was as autobiographical as it gets, Stephen King did not, as we have already touched upon, realize that he had written *The Shining*, about himself before years after it was published. Speaking of autobiographical writing in more general terms, he states that

> the most important things to remember about back story are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn't very interesting. (…) Long life stories are best received in bars
>
> (2010: 227)

The view that good writing cannot be done objectively would, incidentally, make Ayn Rand cringe.

Genette writes that the autobiographical kind of narrator is "by the very fact of his oneness with the hero (…) more "naturally" authorized to speak in his own name

than is the narrator of a "third-person" narrative" (1983: 198). As follows, he is not tied by the discretion and respect a writer might have for the impersonal narrator of a third-person narrative. He has no reason, in other words, to impose silence on the narrator where he has more to say, and needs only respect that he is speaking through one. Genette is, however, quick to point out that any narrator of fiction is fictional, whether the writer has directly assumed him or otherwise.

Ayn Rand was a firm believer in objectivity, as is thoroughly evident in her Objectivist philosophy. She still based some of her fiction on her own life-experiences, however, as was the case with her debut novel, *We the Living* (1936), which takes place in post-revolution Russia and is highly critical of communism, portraying the struggle between the individual and the state. In the foreword of the novel, she wrote that it

> is as near to an autobiography as I will ever write. It is not an autobiography in the literal, but only in the intellectual sense. The plot is invented, the background is not. As a writer of the Romantic school, I would never be willing to transcribe a "real life" story, which would amount to evading the most important and most difficult part of creative writing: the construction of a plot. Besides, it would bore me to death
>
> (2010: xv)

In *Anthem* (1938) she took the criticism one step further, portraying a dystopian future of totalitarian collectivism where the individual was so suppressed that the word "I" had been permanently replaced by "we."

It would probably be impossible to write any piece without drawing upon one's own view of the world – we are subjective beings on some level after all, and at the center of our own universe to some degree. Rand acknowledges this, agreeing that "the best-drawn character in anyone's writing is the author himself" (2000: 120). The author's philosophy is always present in what he chooses to say, and how. "In this sense, a fiction writer cannot hide himself. He stands naked spiritually" (Rand 2000: 120). In accordance with this thought, Wallace seems to have drawn on his own experiences in his writing, for instance with regards to the drugs he was familiar with and the halfway-house depicted in *Infinite Jest*, but not to a degree that could be classified as autobiographical in a stricter sense. It seems the only piece he ever wrote of such a nature was a short one from his college days, about a student suffering from mental problems of a depressive sort – a clear mirror to his own reality at the time.

Keeping It Truthful

As Aristotle put it, tragedy is "an imitation of action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (2005: 1449b25–6), and action implies personal agents – it is shown through the characters. This meant, he wrote, that the they "must be true to life" and consistent, "for though the subject of the imitation (…) be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent" (2005: 1454a24–8). He continued to say that

> since Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level, the example of good portrait-painters should be followed. They, while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful
>
> (2005: 1454b9–13)

We may deduct from this that while fiction should be true to life, it can still stretch the truth in order to make it better or less good than it really is. "Within the action there must be nothing irrational," (2005: 1454b6–7) but a lot can be painted as rational which is not necessarily so. This is probably how Stephen King reasons when he writes of telling the truth while his fiction depicts the most out-of-worldly scenes. The truth lies in how the characters *deal* with the surreal actions they find themselves in, it lies in their character.

King is adamant on the point that you need to tell the truth in order to write good fiction: you can write about "Anything you damn well want. Anything at all… *as long as you tell the truth*" (2010: 158). The dictum used to be "Write what you know," but as King reasons, you can hardly *know* much about starships exploding. You need to think broader, be more inclusive. "The heart also knows things, and so does the imagination. Thank God. If not for heart and imagination, the world of fiction would be a pretty seedy place" (2010: 158). Truth also applies in your choice of genre, King continues, and you should begin by writing what you love to read, both because you know it and because you like/love it. He also believes that "As with all other aspects of fiction, the key to good dialogue is honesty" (King 2010: 185) and that "Honesty in story-telling makes up for a great many stylistic faults, as the work of wooden-prose writers like Theodore Dreiser and Ayn Rand shows, but lying is the great unrepairable fault" (King 2010: 173). Rand did indeed value a certain loyalty to the truth, as for example in characterization:

> *write only as much as you are sure of.* Do not force your characters into artificial behavior (…) If you do not know what a character would do or say, you simply have to give it some more thought
>
> (2000: 86)

The idea of telling the truth was one the Beat poets valued highly. They would "practice" pouring out their souls as if in confession, disclosing every detail, to each other during their frantic conversations, as can be seen in Kerouac's prose. One of his essentials of spontaneous prose reads

> the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind-tap from yourself the song of yourself, *blow!—now! –your* way is your only way—"good"—or "bad"— always honest. ("ludicrous") spontaneous, 'confessional' interesting, because not 'crafted.' Craft *is* craft.
>
> (1958)

Take also Kerouac's project of depicting his view of America into consideration, which took a *lot* of groundwork in the way of observing the country and the people in it. King writes that "the job boils down to two things: paying attention to how the real people around you behave and then telling the truth about what you see" (2010: 189) – a practice that directly corresponds to that of both Kerouac and Wallace. Kerouac decided in his youth to "go after being an American writer, tell the truth, dont be pushed around by [these bigshot gangster football coaches] or anybody else" (2001: 92). He would ride the subway in New York "but instead of doing my homework I'm watching the faces of New York at leisure. It's just like in Lowell again, I'm playing hookey to study other facets of life" (2001: 40). Wallace would also focus on the study of people, writing in "E Unibus Pluram" that fiction writers are a special kind of species, they are watchers for whom human beings and human situations are food. TV, he said, worked out great for fiction writers in this sense, seeing as it did a lot of the research on human beings for them – "it's an incredible gauge of the generic," as he put it (1993: 151), letting the writer watch without being watched. Kerouac had already considered the writer's curiosity with other people, and wrote while thinking of William Burroughs that

> no great writer ever lived without that soft and tender curiosity, verging on maternal care, about what others think and say, no great writer ever packed off from this scene on earth without amazement like the amazement he felt because I was myself
>
> (2001: 205)

In *Vanity of Duluoz*, Kerouac expressed an anguish caused by the heightened prevalence of lying in the world: "The reason I'm so bitter and, as I said, 'in anguish', nowadays, or one of the reasons, is that everybody's begun to lie and because they lie they assume that I lie too" (2001: 13). A highly autobiographical writer, his reaction to not being believed is quite understandable.

To Plot or Not To Plot

In answer to King's attack on Rand's "wooden" style above, consider Rand's view on the importance of plot: "Of course, the author has to be a good stylist to write the scenes properly; but style is a secondary issue. The best style in the world will not save a plotless story" (2000: 40). Rand saw the plot-theme symbiosis as the seed from which a good plot structure and thus a good story could grow. The plot consists of the events through which the action, and thus the meaning, is portrayed. Arbitrary or irrelevant events come in the way of a purposeful and logical progress: "A writer who fails to exercise selectivity in regard to events defaults on the most important aspect of his art" (1975: 73). As Rand viewed art as a concretization of values, the most heinous aesthetic error an author can make with regards to plot is to depict actions with no discernible psychological conflict or intellectual value to back them up. The reader must automatically understand what spurred any one action, or else it will not have any worth in a literary sense – it will not further the novel's meaning. Such errors are, in Rand's opinion, the hallmark of a "bad novel" (1975: 76).

Furthermore, a writer has to start plotting from the end, so as to avoid ending up with unresolved conflicts and issues, "an annoying aspect of badly constructed novels." As follows, "in really bad novels, even the major issues are not resolved" (2000: 47). Start with a defined plan, and do not write as your feelings dictate, letting the "mood of the moment" steer your writing into "such a hodgepodge" (2000: 49).

The most difficult, and thus the most rare, achievement for a writer is, in Rand's mind, the successful integration of an important theme and a complex plot structure. She points to her hero Victor Hugo and his contemporary Dostoevsky as examples of literature at its finest. The events in their novels, she writes, "proceed from, express, illustrate and dramatize their themes" (1975: 77). So how does one create the best plots and secure one's writing this main achievement? You turn to drama:

> when a physical action is tied to serious, important values, it is drama. In this sense, I believe with Victor Hugo that the more melodramatic [in the sense of physical danger or action] the action in which one can express the drama, the better the story
>
> (2000: 42)

The best, most complex plots thus include both a conflict within the hero and a conflict between the hero and other men. The worse the situation you put your hero in, both in relation to his own values and to the people around him, the better your plot-theme will be.

Rand's view on plot – as so many aspects of her philosophy – directly corresponds to that of Aristotle: "most important of all is the structure of the incidents" (2005: 1450a15). He continued to say that "character determines man's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse" (2005: 1450a19–20) and that no matter how deficient a tragedy might be in other respects, it's possession of "a plot and artistically constructed incidents" can let it produce the essential tragic effect better than plays that lack in plot and excel in other areas because the "the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy—Peripeteia or Reversal of the Situation, and Recognition scenes—are part of the plot" (2005: 1450a33–6). It clearly follows, Aristotle goes on to say, that "the poet or 'maker' should be the maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions" (2005: 1451b27–9).

Furthermore, he pointed to the plot as the test for good stories, and said of the balance between complication and unraveling:

> Many poets tie the knot well, but unravel it ill. Both arts, however, should always be mastered. Again, the poet should remember what has often been said, and not make an Epic structure into a Tragedy—by an Epic structure I mean one with a multiplicity of plots—as if, for instance, you were to make a tragedy out of the entire story of the Iliad
>
> (2005: 1456a9–15)

Stephen King is of a different mind altogether. When it comes to the starting-point of good writing, he is strongly opposed to Rand's and Aristotle's view that the theme of a novel is its purpose whereas the story is the form, and that "form follows purpose." In his mind, "starting with the questions and thematic concerns is a recipe for bad fiction. Good fiction always begins with story and progresses to theme; it almost

never begins with theme and progresses to story" (2010: 208), pointing out the possible exception of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

The Fun of the Matter

In "The Nature of the Fun" (1998) Wallace described how his view of writing as a primarily fun thing to do had developed throughout his authorship. As he writes,

> when you first start out trying to write fiction, the whole endeavor's about fun. You don't expect anybody else to read it. You're writing almost wholly to get yourself off. To enable your own fantasies and deviant logics and to escape or transform parts of yourself you don't like. And it works—and it's terrific fun.
>
> (2012: 196–7)

Then, he describes, as you keep at it and people start enjoying your work, you start making money off of it, and it gets "complicated and confusing, not to mention scary. Now you feel like you're writing for other people, or at least you hope so" (2012: 197). What was once fun gets tough as you are now writing for other people's approval, constantly worrying about having strangers like and admire you. This vanity, Wallace concludes, results in "shitty fiction" (2012: 198), and "shitty fiction" winds up in the wastebasket. It is just that at this point you might as well decide to through it out because it will hurt your reputation, as simply because it is bad. After hitting this low point you might get back to having fun again, letting the double bind your vanity and fear put you in lead to a good end. That place you are leaving was so unpleasant you're now "so anxious to avoid [it] that the fun you rediscover is a way fuller and large-hearted kind of fun."

King echoes Wallace's view and says that you cannot worry about being liked if you are to write well: he is "convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing (2010: 127) and thinks "good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation" as well as "about making good choices when it comes to picking the tools you plan to work with" (2010: 128). But, most of all, "If there's no joy in it, it's just no good" (2010: 150).

In this later stage of your authorship, Wallace found that you could use writing as a way of going "deep into yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see" – the very stuff you used to hide in your early writings, that is, and "the stuff all writers and readers share and respond to, feel" (2012: 198). After all, "Showing the reader that you're funny or talented or whatever,

trying to be liked (…) just doesn't have enough motivational calories in it to carry you over the long haul" (Burn 2012: 50). What we can deduce is that Wallace held the view that in order for a piece of writing to bear good quality, the author must have enjoyed writing it. That does not necessarily mean that the piece of writing has to be on an enjoyable topic, as his talk of introspection and hidden sides of yourself shows, but that the act of writing itself was not aimed at gaining popularity with an audience rather than at gaining a sense of pleasure in creation and truth-telling.

It was not until he started *Carrie* in 1973 that Stephen King experienced how writing could be hard work. Up till that point he had always been having fun doing it, at night after work, and even on his lunch breaks. Working as a sports reporter in his youth, he even wrote a novel on his spare time at work. He attributes the loss of fun to his new job teaching creative writing, echoing the paradox Wallace pointed out concerning writers teaching creative writing – we will come back to that later – in saying that "by most Friday afternoons I felt as if I'd spent the week with jumper cables clamped to my brain" (2010: 73). He would have no extra energy for writing, resorting to "tinkering" with six or seven unfinished manuscripts from time to time,

> usually when drunk. If asked what I did in my spare time, I'd tell people I was writing a book—what else does *any* self-respecting creative writing teacher do with his or her spare time? And of course I'd lie to myself, telling myself there was still time
>
> (2010: 73)

Kerouac would also come to writing with a fun-loving attitude, enjoying writing in the styles of the authors he admired at any given point, saying of the point where he discovered James Joyce that it was "the greatest fun I ever had 'writing' in my life because I had just discovered James Joyce and I was imitating Ulysses, I thought" (2001: 105). When he had "larned" his own style, however, the fun went out of it for him, as he would recount in hindsight. When he could no longer imitate the suffering of his influences, he needed to face his own. This did not, as we well know, end very well. The notion that this might happen had struck him while he served in the Merchant Marine, some forty twenty years earlier:

> I was having fun, all alone practically on one big ship, and suddenly it began to occur to me that someday I would become a real serious writer with no time to fool around with poetry or form or style
>
> (2001: 182)

As King, however, Kerouac was eager enough as a young writer to work on a novel while at work as a journalist for the Lowell Sun. At noon every day, after fulfilling his editorial duties, he would get to work at what would become the saga of his life and adventures.

It is here worth noting that both Kerouac and King use sexual metaphors to describe the ecstatic feeling of creating something that comes from within. King writes that he never liked Carrie, and that this made writing the novel about her very hard: "For me writing has always been best when it's intimate, as sexy as skin on skin. With *Carrie* I felt as if I were wearing a rubber wet-suit I couldn't pull off" (2010: 76). Kerouac, for his part, advised writers to "come from within, out" (1958).

Nature Versus Nurture

In order to illustrate his thoughts on talent vs. work, Stephen King has set up a hierarchical system in which to place writers that looks a little like this:

Needless to point out, King finds that there is such a thing as a bad writer (and a lot of them, he is sorry to say). On what concerns *good writers*, he has two theses: "The first is that good writing consists of mastering the fundamentals (vocabulary, grammar, the elements of style)" and

> The second is that while it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer

> out of a good one, it *is* possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one
>
> (2010: 142)

Amongst the divine accidents in King's system we find Shakespeare, Yeats, Faulkner and Shaw, authors who are, in King's words, "gifted in a way that is beyond our ability to understand, let alone attain" (2010: 142), the literary equivalent to supermodels, fortunate "freaks of nature" who just happen to be born with bodies that reflect the preferences of their day.

In his interview with *the Paris Review*, Kerouac joked that he should become a pricy writing teacher and teach the kids a few lessons, but in seriousness said "you can't learn these things. You know why? Because you have to be born with tragic fathers" – a view that echoes in the beginning of *On the Road*'s original scroll.

Wallace taught – not for his own pleasure or for the belief that you could "grow" good writers but because he needed the financial means to sustain his writing – and was of a mind that there was such a thing as talent, but that you could always improve your technique and knowledge even if you were not born with it. In "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," he wrote about the ironic loop of the Creative Writing Program. During the 70s and 80s, there was a boom of such programs in the U.S. The situation was unprecedented, and all the Conspicuously Young writers Wallace mentions in his piece – names such as Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerny – had been trained in one. Most held MFAs in creative writing, and a few were pursuing what Wallace with a hint of irony called Creative PhDs. There were, Wallace wrote, many upsides to such programs, but also several downsides. The relation between the fiction professor and the fiction student, for example, "has unhealthiness built right in" (1988: 10) because most writing teachers are writers by calling, not teachers, and so must be expected to resent their students to some degree for "stealing" their writing time and energy.

As was the case with King, whose writing time was almost entirely sacrificed in his days teaching creative writing, which he incidentally was "doubtful" of, though "not entirely against" (King 2010: 231). Wallace goes on to say that also,

> in order to remain both helpful and sane, the professional writer/teacher has got to develop, consciously or not, an aesthetic doctrine, a static set of principles about how a "good" story works. (…) But consider what this means: the Program staffer must teach the practice of art, which by its nature always exists in at least some state of tension with the rules of its

> practice, as essentially an applied system of rules. Surely this kind of *enforced* closure to further fictional possibilities isn't good for most teachers' own literary development. Nor is it at all good or their students, most of whom have been in school for at least sixteen years and know that the way the school game is played is: (1) Determine what the instructor wants; and (2) Supply it forthwith.
>
> (1988: 11)

Thus, Wallace stated that whereas rules are good to build on, you should be able and, to a certain degree, encouraged, to break them in order to find your own voice. He also pointed out the irony in teaching writers how to write in an academic climate that expects students *not* to make mistakes if they want to stay in the program, concluding that while creative writing programs in good faith claimed to train professional writers, they really educated new creative writing teachers. In fact, he went as far as to wonder aloud whether these programs might not, in fact, lead to a lowering of literary standards which, added to the collective teaching of set rules for writing – or "weird creative constraints" – could engender literary mediocrity and what he calls "McPoems" (1988: 12).

Ayn Rand had the following to say about talent:

> It is possible for a writer to hold good literary premises by default, meaning; by imitation or by feeling. Many writers do, and thus cannot identify the reasons for their writing
>
> (Rand 2000: 8)

That is, a writer can be moved to write without knowing what urges him. Rand warned her readers that they should "not count on this mystical power to give *you* that talent" because "To acquire literary premises, or to develop those you already have, what you need is *conscious* knowledge" (2000: 8). Thus, in a sense, writing both can and cannot be taught. It is not a mystical talent, she said, but includes "so complex an integration" that "no teacher can supervise the process for you. You can learn all the theory, but unless you practice—unless you actually write—you will not be able to apply the theory" (2000: 52).

Inspiration

Some of our writers are pretty clear on the topic of inspiration. Where does this seemingly magical force come from, what does it do and how does one get it? King is fast to get one thing very clear on this point:

> There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up.
>
> (2010: 37)

You then let the ideas simmer on the back burner, stowed away in your brain between consciousness and subconscious, until the fusion has evolved into a story.

Kerouac found inspiration in his friends and his travels, as we have touched upon, but also through his reading and imitation of other writers: he never hid the fact that he tried on the styles of his influences for measure, moving through styles as he moved through the world of literature, writing that

> I saw it: a lifetime of writing about what I'd seen with my own eyes, told in my own words, according to the style I decided on at whether twenty-one years old or thirty or forty or whatever later age
>
> (2001: 190)

Starting off as a teen, "under the influence of Jonathan Miller (…) writing my own brand of serious 'Hemingway' stories, later" (2001: 59) before hitting upon Thomas Wolfe, who "woke me up to America as a Poem in stead of America as a place to struggle around and sweat in (…) and see the real America that was there and that 'had never been uttered'" (2001: 75) – an influence that weighed heavily throughout his authorship and life.

As for Rand, she viewed inspiration as something a writer could learn to give himself and wrote that if you learned to store information in your mind for future need, saving details and knowledge, you can keep stoking this fire of information and never running out of things to write about.

"Do You Do It for the Money, Honey?"

Aristotle ranked those tragedies first that held a well constructed plot that was "single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain" (2005: 1453a13–14). The problem, he wrote, was that the "weakness of the spectators" led them to favor the second-rank plots, as could be found in the Odyssey, thus guiding the poet "in what he writes by the wishes of his audience" (2005: 1453a35). It comes down to this: do not base your writing on the expectations and wishes of your audience, a view reflected both in

Wallace and in King, who both found that writing, in order to be good, had to come from a place untainted by ego, vanity and the need to be liked.

As will become clear, success came as a hard blow for several of our authors. The stress of considering the audience and the stress of becoming famous turned out to be too much for some. That was the case for Kerouac, who, in *Vanity of Duluoz*, published in the year before his death, wrote that he was anguished on account of becoming "god help me, a WRITER whose very 'success', far from being a happy triumph as of old, was the sign of doom himself" (2001: 9).

> For after all what is success? You kill yourself and a few others to get to the top of your profession, so to speak, so that when you reach middle age or a little later you can stay home and cultivate your own garden in bliss: but by that time, because you've invented some kind of better mousetrap, mobs come rushing across your garden and trampling all your flowers. What's with that?
>
> (2001: 29)

In answering the question "Do you do it for the money, honey?" Stephen King says "no. Don't now and never did (…) I never set a single word down on paper with the thought of being paid for it" (since his high school day, we must assume, considering what we have already discovered) (2010: 249). Deliberately turning to a genre because it makes you money is, in Kings mind, to commit "intellectual dishonesty. It is "morally wonky, for one thing (…) Also, brothers and sisters, it doesn't work" (2010: 159). He continues to say that he has always written because the practice fulfilled him, and that though it has paid off the mortage on his house and provided his children with college educations, he "did it all for the buzz. I did it for the pure joy of the thing" (2010: 249), the "thing" being what he later calls "the ordinary miracle that comes with any attempt to create something" (2010: 268). Writing simply makes his life better, and is not at all about the money or the fame, but about "enriching the lives of those who will read your work" (2010: 269).

Wallace said, in a letter to a friend, that he was allergic to writers who craved fame more than they craved achievement: "The obvious fact that the kids don't Want to Write so much as Want to Be Writers make their letters so depressing" (Max 2012: 178). One such young writer that asked him for advice on how to become a writer, and Wallace answered that he should be his own best critic and work on getting his writing as good as it could get; the publishing would come later.

Comparison of the Selected Poetics Pt. II: The Company We Keep

Aristotle felt that "Tragedy like Epic poetry produces its effect even without action; it reveals its power by mere reading" (1462a11–13) and that "it has vividness of impression in reading as well as in representation" (1462a17–18). One of the key points of agreement amongst our writers is that writers must love to read and write, and do so avidly, not out of necessity but because they like it. In doing these things out of love for the written word, a whole learning process is going on, as we have already touched upon. Every book carries a lesson, and often the bad ones can teach us more about the craft than the best of them: while good writing teaches the reader about good use of grammar, vocabulary and style, gracious narration, plot construction, creation of believable characters and King's all-important "truth-telling," bad writing teaches you a whole lot more through showing you what you will not want to do. In short, "Reading is the creative center of a writer's existence" (King 2010: 147). Rand takes it to a more metaphysical level in saying that

> The reason why art has such a profoundly *personal* significance for men is that art confirms or denies the efficacy of a man's consciousness, according to whether an art work supports or negates his own fundamental view of reality
>
> (1975: 13)

Another point concerning the company you keep is the effect it has on you. Wayne C. Booth opens his *The Company We Keep* (1988) by recounting a changing situation from his days at the University of Chicago in the 60s. What started as a colored member of the faculty refusing to teach Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to his literature students, ended up shaking the firm beliefs held by the rest of the staff. Booth recalls how they held a view that sophisticated critics of literature did not judge a work by the effects it might have on its readers. Paradoxically, he says, they also held the view that reading good literature was vital to themselves and to their students. What the man who had refused to teach *Huckleberry Finn* had caused was a realization on his peers' part that art and life are tied together. In our day, ethical criticism – where the critic aims to describe the meeting between an author's ethos and a reader's ethos – is one of the largest modes of criticism, although there are still critics who refuse to agree that art and life are two concepts inextricably connected.

Booth's own main incentive in exploring the ethics of literature is to find ways of talking about the ethical experience of narratives.

Booth goes on formulate a metaphor of implied authors as friends, seeing as literature can naturally contribute to a person's character. The question is whether the contribution is of a positive or negative nature, not just during the act of reading, but also after the reader has finished a novel. In this way, works of literature can be said to influence a person in a similar way as deep, shallow, true and false friendships might.

Martha Nussbaum echoes Booth's views in her "Reading for Life," opening with a musing on how David Copperfield the narrator reminds the readers of his life story of the power fiction holds in its ability to create friendly relationships between readers and writers. "People care for the books they read;" she writes, "and they are changed by what they care for – both during the time of reading and in countless ways more difficult to discern" (1992: 231).

Stephen King holds the view that writing is "about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well. It's about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy" (King 2010: 269). A similar view can be found in Wallace's talk with Burn, where he stated that

> a piece of fiction that's really true allows you to be intimate with (…) a world that resembles our own in enough emotional particulars so that the way different things must feel is carried out with us into the real world. I think what I would like my stuff to do is make people less lonely. Or really to affect people.
>
> (Burn 2012: 16)

Our writers seem to have been of a similar mind on the topic of reading, all of them mentioning how they loved to read from a young age, and all citing references and influences.

Booth points out that the importance of "friendship" has been lost in this modern day and age – some encyclopedias and dictionaries do not even list the word. How could a notion that was for thousands of years considered a very valuable one – even the goal of a good life – be of so little value to us today? The decline is reflected in the literary world as well, where there used to be a tradition of personifying literary works. This tradition was especially strong in the 19th and early 20th century, and was

often reflected even in the works' titles. And no wonder about it, as Booth quotes René Descartes in saying

> the reading of all great books is like conversing with the best people of earlier times: it is even a studied conversation in which the authors show us only the best of their thoughts
>
> (1988: 157)

Literature as Telepathy or Co-Authoring

Several of our writers here are of a mind that the writer and the reader of a novel participate in a telepathically creative endeavor. As Jean-Paul Sartre put it,

> It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others
>
> (2003: 31)

In fact, he said, reading is "directed creation" (2003: 33) where the reader must continually exceed the written work. Thus, nothing is accomplished if you write a novel where the reader is not included in the creational process. Sartre considered written works appeals to future readers, and meant that their value as art works relied entirely on this. Seeing as the reader in his view carried out what the writer had set out to accomplish, the finished product would reside in the reader's mind, and this would be where the writer was essential to the work he wrote, where the process of birthing his work would make a difference in the world.

Stephen King's reckoning corresponds to that of Sartre. In pondering the question of what writing is, a question important enough to fill its own five-page section in *On Writing,* he answers "Telepathy, of course" (2010: 103). He then goes on to say that while all arts depend on telepathy to some degree, it is purest in literature. In King's eyes, books are magic objects where the writer and the reader come close in a sphere outside of time and space, having "a meeting of the minds" (2010: 106). No one needs speak, for through "terms of rough comparison" the writer and the reader may view the fictional world of the book with similar eyes. To King, the main connection between reader and writer flows through description: "description begins in the writer's imagination, but should finish in the reader's" (2010: 174). This is why, he says, a writer must not pay too much attention to details – it takes the fun out of it on both ends. Which leads us on to the most important

lesson of King's career – a lesson he vehemently tries to pass on to the readers of his poetics – the practice of writing with your door closed and rewriting with your door open. In other words: write the story first as if telling it to yourself before opening the door to the outside world and rewriting it so that it can belong to anyone who wants to read it. A similar, although far more open and wild view can be found in Kerouac:

> Blow as deep as you want–write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind
>
> (1958)

Yet, Kerouac's advice hints at another kind of sharing between writer and reader, one reminiscent of Proustian prose and more focused on the writer's experience of the written object, conveyed and thus shared with the reader: "Write for the world to read and see your exact pictures of it," "The unspeakable visions of the individual." He dubs this form *bookmovie*, "the visual American form," a movie in words, "Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog" (1959).

This last prescriptive tip marks his divergence from Sartre and King, but can be argued to resemble the feeling one gets in reading Wallace's fiction. Kerouac does not talk about cooperative creation, but rather of a telepathic *streaming* of his visions and pictures through the written word and into the reader's mind. The focus on *blowing* "as per jazz musician" (1958) further aids this continuous stream of pictures, leaving the reader with a feeling not so much of reading words as of viewing sketches, of rather feeling than creating the visions. We must not be mistaken, this is Kerouac's monologue, and though we are free to experience it, he is the creator:

> The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object
>
> (Kerouac 1958)

David Foster Wallace was, on his part, most concerned with *giving* his readers something substantial that they could take away with them after finishing the book. He was, as he said, convinced that being able to give readers such a gift out of love was a "timelessly vital and sacred thing about good writing." Wallace's friend and colleague Jonathan Franzen writes that the two came up with a description of literature in their conversations and correspondence in the early 90s: "[literature is] a way of connecting [deeply], on relatively safe middle ground, with another human

being." "This," Franzen continues, "we decided, was what fiction was for" (*Five Dials* 2008: 16). Zadie Smith backed this up in her own speech, claiming that

> That was his literary preoccupation: the moment when the ego disappears and you're able to offer up your love as a gift without expectation of reward. At this moment the gift hangs (…) between the one who sends it and the one who receives it, and reveals itself as belonging to neither.
> (*Five Dials* 2008: 14)

The above is not to say that Wallace's writings in any way oppose the notion of reading as telepathy. In fact, a fax he sent to *Harpers* before the publication of a 1998 piece on Kafka reads that his goal was to "preserve an oralish, out-loud feel" in his writing so that it would not come off as a written story, but rather a spoken or *thought* story (Max 2012: 318–9). Those who were close to him have, described him as a person with a huge talent who saw this talent as a commitment. It is also clear that he was entirely committed in leaving his readers with more than they brought to the table, and that he put his entire being into achieving this end. This take on what makes writing *good* corresponds to Sartre's view of reading as "a pact of generosity between author and reader. Each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself. For this confidence is itself generosity" (Sartre: 41). Sartre explained that in this exercise in generosity, the writer requires of the reader "not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values" (2003: 37). Seeing as it is a pact, this requirement runs both ways.

Expounding on his and Wallace's aforementioned definition of fiction, Jonathan Franzen goes on to say that "A way out of loneliness" was the essential formulation of literature they agreed on in the end. During a car drive the two took together, they had discussed how literature could do just that by giving comfort and breaking through what Wallace in *Infinite Jest* described as each person's "transcendent horror [of] loneliness, excluded encagement in the self" (Wallace 2006: 694).

Rand focused more on the mode in which the writer and reader communicated than why, writing that

> The psycho-epistemological process of communication between an artist and a viewer or reader goes as follows: the artist starts with a broad abstraction which he has to concretize, to bring into reality by means of the

> appropriate particulars; the viewer perceives the particulars, integrates them and grasps the abstraction from which they came, thus completing the circle. Speaking metaphorically, the creative process resembles a process of deduction; the viewing process resembles a process of induction.
>
> (1975: 25–6)

She did, however, feel that communication always came second to the artist's primary purpose: to realize his view of man and existence. The communication simply acts as the means in which this realization is translated into objective, communicable, terms. Still, though, "An artist reveals his naked soul in his work—and so, gentle reader, do you when you respond to it" (1975: 34).

Reading (a Lot) and Writing (a Lot)

"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut" (King 2010: 145). King's stance on this topic is, as we will se, reflected throughout our selection.

As becomes clear in T.D. Max' biography, Wallace loved reading from an early age, and so did the rest of his family. From the age of five, he would start writing poems and small humor pieces, even word-playing his mother the English teacher. "There are a few books I have read that I've never been the same after," he told Stephen Burn, "and I think all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness. We're all terribly, terribly lonely" (Burn 2012: 16).

Wallace continued reading through high school and college, and while he did write in periods, he did not come to it easily. His talent for the written word was more than apparent in his classes, where he would ace all writing assignments and even ace some on the side for his friends in exchange for pot. When it came to writing as a career, however, he was frightened. Always out to excel at what he undertook, he had to go several rounds with himself in the early college days at Amherst before he had nowhere left to hide, as Max puts it, from writing. After taking up philosophy and logic, he dove into literature classed when he finally decided to go for it and start focusing on writing.

King is very clear on the topic of reading and writing throughout *On Writing*, saying that "Reading is the creative center of a writer's life" and that while it should

be done because you love to read, not simply to study, it is still a continuous learning-experience. Because your own writing style does not come to exist in a vacuum – you sample the styles you read and try them on for measure. "Stylistic blending is a necessary part of developing one's style (…) You have to read widely, constantly refining (and redefining) your own work as you do so" (2010: 147).

> Read and write four to six hours a day. If you cannot find the time for that, you can't expect to become a good writer (…) The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and intimacy with the process of writing (…) The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor
>
> (2010: 150)

King sees the paragraph as the beat of fiction, and writes that "the more fiction you read and write, the more you'll find your paragraphs forming on their own. And that's what you want" (2010: 131). Seeing as the paragraph is your beat, you "must learn to use it well if you are to write well. What this means is lots of practice; you have to learn the beat" (2010: 135). Kerouac, of course, had a more outspoken view on the spontaneity of this beat, "blowing as per jazz musician;" the original scroll of *On the Road* one long paragraph without stop.

As we have seen, Rand was also of a mind that you needed to read in order to acquire a conscious knowledge of what you wanted your writing to be like, making mental notes of what you appreciated and what you did not appreciate in the fiction you read, always giving yourself reasons for *why* it was you liked or disliked the particular elements.

Kerouac was a firm believer in providing himself with "an adventurous education," cutting classes at school, "just so I could go to the Lowell Public Library and study by myself at leisure" (2001: 27), figuring at the time that "the more you study, the more you subsequently know; naturally, the more you know, the nearer you get to perfection as a journalist" (2001: 39).

Imitation Before Creation

"Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes," Aristotle wrote, "each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood" (2005: 1448b5–7) and next "there is the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm" (2005: 1448b20–21): "through imitation [man] learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated" (2005: 1448b9–11) and

"persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special aptitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to Poetry" (2005: 1448b22–4). One of the terms Aristotle used a lot and saw no need to define in his *Poetics* was descriptive of this instinct to imitate action: *mimesis*.

As we have already seen, Stephen King started out imitating, or copying, others. First came the comic strips, where he would add his own description, then came the rewriting of famous horror stories: "Imitation preceded creation" (King 2010: 27).

Wallace also experimented with imitation in his early days, later telling interviewer David Lipsky that his gift in college – where he got serious about his writing, and so also about studies of literature and composition – was to be "a weird kind of forger. I can sound kind of like anybody" (Marshall 2010). Indeed, many critics have pointed out the obvious influences in his work. His main influence is thought to be Thomas Pynchon, whose fiction Wallace praised at numerous occasions. Especially the slightly paranoid ambience, the names of his characters and the sense of America as semi-toxic found in *The Broom of the System* have been thought to carry that certain Pynchonesque twang. His tone, on the other hand, has been attributed to influences such as J.D. Salinger and Don De Lillo. His famous footnotes that can go on for pages, even earning their own footnotes and sidetracks, is another postmodern and Pynchonesque feature – as is the form of stories within stories within stories – hinting at far and wide reading and literary inspiration.

In *Vanity of Dulouz*, maybe Kerouac's most autobiographical work, really more like a memoir, he recounted how he would adopt the writing styles of the authors who inspired him. He also explains his pursuit of an "adventurous education," as we have already seen, which led him to a deep-felt love for literature and reading. "I was happy in my room at night writing 'Atop an Underwood', stories in the Saroyan-Hemingway-Wolfe style as best I could figure it at age nineteen…" (2001: 97).

> That's how writers begin, by imitating the masters (without suffering like said masters), till they larn their own style, and by the time they larn their own style there's no more fun in it, because you cant imitate any other master's suffering but your own.
>
> (2001: 107)

Romanticism

The admiration of Romanticism and/or Romantic writers is a clear common denominator amongst our selection. Rand was most clear about her influence by the Romantic era and its writers, in particular Victor Hugo and Dostoevsky. The Romantic school of literature held the premise that man has free will and that he is free to choose. In that effect, he is the architect of his own life. This view of man led to what Rand saw as the school's distinguishing mark: the "good plot structure" (2000: 19). If man can choose, then he can *plan*, and so his life does not consist of a series of accidents. The plot is a "purposeful progression of events" (2000: 20) that befits this view of man, as opposed to the determinism that can be found in Naturalism.

Many might be surprised to find that Wallace was also indebted to the period's writing. In the interview with McLaffery he said

> If what's always distinguished bad writing—flat characters, a narrative world that's clichéd and not recognizably human, etc.—is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world. If readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then [Bret Easton] Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything. Look man, we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.
>
> (Burn 2012: 26)

Concluding that "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being," his views ring with the Romantic notions of individualism and psychological development. They also fit into Ayn Rand's favor of how the reader, in Romantic characterization, is presented with "as much human psychology as a writer's ambition and ability permit" (2000: 72) – you do not simply present an onion, but detail the ever deeper layers of the onion, so that your reader might understand what lies at the core of it. In other words, the writer dives as deep as he can into the motivation behind a character's actions in order to show what motivates him and *why* he holds the values he acts according to. While considering human psychology, the times Wallace

described, the fiction that resulted from it, and his view of this fiction is interesting when you draw a parallel between the industrial age which first saw Romanticism and the increasing commercialism and TV-presence Wallace reacted to in his own day.

Wallace's agreement with the Romantic era's philosophy was also evident in his apparent "devastation" (Max 2012: 255) at reading Michiki Kakutani's review of his *Interviews With Hideous Men* in *The New York Times* in 1999. Kakutani accused him of not living up to the promise he had given in "E Omnibus Pluram" to reanimate the "deep moral that distinguished the work of the great 19th-century writers."

Furthermore, Wallace and his friend Mark Costello had decided on an 1819 poem by the Romantic poet John Keats as a touchstone for *good writing*:

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb
> So haunt thy dreams and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
> So in my veins red life might stream again
> And thou be conscience-calm'd – see here it is – I hold it towards you
>
> (Keats 2006: 939)

The poem – incidentally written seemingly spontaneously in the margin of the manuscript of another, longer poem – suggests that if the poet was dead (Keats was in fact slowly dying from tuberculosis as this was written), his reader would wish himself dead if it would resurrect the poet, as the prospect of living in a world where that poet was not writing were unthinkable. Wallace would write to Costello in sadness, saying that he wanted to "make the hand come out," but "the hand, Mark – there's no hand" (Max 2012: 235).

Still, in "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," Wallace pointed out that "the Romanticist view of fiction as essentially a mirror, distinguished from the real world it reflects only by its portability and mercilessly "objective" clarity, has finally taken it on the chin," and that "if mimesis isn't dead, then it's on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be" (1988: 13). Ayn Rand would surely shiver at the thought.

Kerouac was no stranger of Romantic poets himself: especially William Blake was influential in the Beat aesthetic. Echoing one of his influences, the proto-Romantic Sturm und Drang-author Goethe, Kerouac stated that "sound creation is moral in temper. Goethe proved that." He found further proof of his conviction in

"NIETZSCHE: art is the highest task and the proper metaphysical activity of this life" (2001: 255), a conviction corresponding to Romantic philosophy. He continued to write that "artistic morality, that was the point, (…) for the sake of purgation (…) the way writers are born, I guess" (2001: 257).

King has, on his end, acknowledged the influence of the Romantic Bram Stoker on his fiction, although his ties with Romanticism cannot be said to be of a degree even close to that of the rest of our writers

Conclusion

The modern novel has in many ways been emancipated from the tragedies and comedies of Ancient Greek theatre, but the discourse on poetics still hold fast to many of the notions first put down by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Today, however, good writing is not as much about teaching as it is about sharing and opening the readers' eyes to new views, leaving him "heavier" after the reading experience.

As we have seen, Stephen King and David Foster Wallace agree that in order to write well, you cannot worry about being liked, a view that is reminiscent of Aristotle's insistence that poets should not heed the expectations of their audience on account of their work's quality. Wallace held that in order for a piece of writing to be good, the author must have enjoyed writing it, whereas King focuses on letting go of fear and affectation as well as making good choices when it comes to the tools you set out with. Both, however, agree that teaching the art of writing to others led to a loss of time, energy and ability to write on their part. Neither considered creative writing programs altogether useless, but both found aspects of the ordeal highly ironic. Wallace considered it backwards that creative writing students should be expected to follow a set of rules put in place by a professor in an environment where following the rules is necessary if you want to succeed. He felt that rules had to be bent and broken if any writer were to find his or her own voice, and that an academic environment did not suit this need at all. He was also worried that the restriction of the creative element in such an environment would lead to little variation in the fiction stemming from writers who had studied in them, pointing to the generation of Conspicuously Young writers in the 1990s with their creative college degrees.

All of our writers agree that in order to become a good writer, you have to love reading and writing, and do so a lot. King prescribes a mandatory minimum of four to six hours, and insists that you cannot expect to become a good writer if that seems like an impossible amount of time to fit into your schedule. The real importance of reading, he points out – and Kerouac, Rand and Wallace stand in agreement to this – is that it creates an intimacy and ease with language and the process of writing. Through reading, you learn what you like and do not like in other people's writing, and soak up grammar, syntax and elements of style that you may incorporate into your own writing. No writing teacher can give you the knowledge

and experience you can gain by diving into written language yourself. You need to be able to apply the theory, not merely memorize and copy others' impression of it, although all but Rand consider imitation as a natural and necessary learning process that precedes creation. Kerouac and King both started out copying other writers, and although Rand does not concur that imitation leads to a deeper sense of independence, she firmly placed herself within a Romantic tradition, and thus cannot be said not to be entirely self-made in terms of style and artistic considerations herself.

Whereas neither of our writers seem to have believed that you are either born with a talent for writing or not, the men seem to agree that you need to have a good eye for language to start with, and that you can only learn so much. They all focus on grammar – King and Wallace suggest that you take very good care of your language and that you observe its laws, but both agree that when you do know the rules and you are good enough, you are free to break them (and may do well to do so). King seldom did, but Wallace was a wizard with words and would bend the rules on a level that would make his copy-editors' heads spin. Kerouac, on his side, suggested to disregard all rules and "swim in language sea" (1959), letting what you feel find its own way out. King offers a hierarchy of writing where the top is reserved for what he calls "divine accidents" – those who are born with *it*, a form of literary genius that you can never acquire. But all is not lost, for, as he says, whereas you can never make a divine writer out of a good one, or a competent writer out of a bad one, it *is* possible, with a lot of hard work, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.

Wallace focused on the idea that a good writer should be able to *give* his reader something to bring with him out of the reading experience. This gift should be given out of love, with no strings of vanity and ego attached. King and Rand agree. Whereas King feels that any book worth reading is about *something* that bears weight outside the reading experience, Rand always focused on the projection of values and visions of morally superior characters. Kerouac was, on his part, most focused on sharing his view of America as a poem with his reader, conveying the feeling of his day in his fiction.

They all agree, however, that reading is a sort of telepathy in which the reader and the writer co-operate in a process of creation: the ideas and images start in the writer's head, and end in the reader's. The reader has to tie the words of the writer to his own subjective feelings, memories and ideas, in that way giving them life in his own mind. Thus, good writing is demanding on both ends, it is a "pact of generosity,"

as Sartre put it, where each part trusts and counts on the other as much as on himself. Wallace found that what he called "trash fiction" did not fulfill this crucial aspect of literature, and likened the buying and consuming of such fiction to the hiring of prostitutes: you pay for a sense of intimacy, but seeing as you are not expected to bring anything to the table, what you get is synthetic and unreal. Whereas "trash fiction" can be written in a crafted manner and offer entertaining stories, it is important do distinguish between the superficial and the meaningful. In the spirit of co-authoring, you get what you give. If you bring a lot to the book you are reading, chances are you will bring a lot with you back into the world outside its covers.

Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum speak of books from a similar angle. They both saw them as friends whose qualities resemble those of our human acquaintances. As with any other friendship, the literary company you keep affect you and your character, and, as Wallace pointed out, offer a way out of loneliness. Rand and Wallace agreed that good writing functioned as a starting point for introspection, musings on what it means to be human, and consideration of values in one self and others. Wallace and Rand coincide in their view with the Romantic school of literature, in which the individual was highly valued. Rand held that art's basic purpose is to "hold up to man a concreticized image of his nature and his place in the universe" (1975: 10–11), whereas Wallace held that "Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished," but would always "find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" (Burn 2012: 26). The role of good art, he said, seems to be that it locates the human and magical elements that still exist and apply CPR to them so that they may live in spite of the times' darkness. Kerouac also tapped into his Romanticist leanings, formulating that "sound creation is moral in temper" (2001: 255).

Kerouac, King, Wallace and Rand have agreed on several central points considering what constitutes *good* writing. Considering how different they were and are, this agreement might suggest a wider notion of what constitutes good, less good, or even bad writing. I will conclude that there *is* such a thing as good and bad writing, at least in these authors' views. I do not think that we will all agree on what is *good* in the term's entirety, but from what we have seen here, some aspects truly are required. Especially essential is a love for reading and writing, as well as the "pact of generosity" that enables co-authoring to happen. Good writing has to be demanding so that the reader might leave the piece of writing heavier than he or she came to it.

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Appendices

Chart I: What the selection of writers had in common

	Kerouac	King	Wallace	Rand
Started with imitation	√	√	√	–
Had journalistic background	√	√	√	√
Abused substances	√	√	√	√
Was an alcoholic	√	√	√	–
Suffered stints of depression	√	√	√	√
Read and wrote a lot	√	√	√	√
Was inspired by Romantic school of lit.	√	–	√	√

Chart II: What the writers considered essential to *good* writing

	Kerouac	King	Wallace	Rand
Nature vs. Nurture	Nurture (what you feel will find its own way)	N+N	N+N	N+N
Imitation precedes creation	√	√	–	–
Feeling vs. mechanics	F	M	M	M
Tell the truth	√	√	√	√
You need to have fun	√	√	√	–
Advocated substance-abuse	√	X	X	X
Stick with the first word that comes to mind	√	√	–	√
Read and write a lot	√	√	√	–
Know your grammar	–	√	√	√
(When you know it, you may disregard it)	√	√	√	X
Co-writing/ telepathy	√	√	√	√
Show, don't tell	√	√	√ (but do not let it show that you are *showing*)	√